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Leven en werken van Matthias van Geuns M.D., 1735-1817

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SUMMARY

It is a general human quality to concentrate the interest in eminent personalities of a more or less long-ago mainly in figures, who lived and performed great actions in a flourishing-period.

In the Netherlands, where without doubt epoch-making contributions towards the development of the medical science have been supplied the study of the history of medicine has confined itself principally to descriptions of the lives of world-famous pioneers in the glorious seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, it is as well from a medical as from a historical point of view by no means less interesting to pay full attention also to persons, who have put not very important land-marks on the road to progress and have lived in a much less renowned time. He who wishes to revive the reminiscence of such a less excelling predecessor has to be conscious that his task will be difficult and unthankful.

The author of this work was not to be intimidated, however, in the conviction that a clinician as *Matthias van Geuns*, although certainly not belonging to the coryphaei of the medical science nor in the least living in a golden age of the country, still has to be called pre-eminently a characteristic representative of the order of physicians in the curious transition-period from old to modern medicine in the second half of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century.

On September 2 1735 *Matthias van Geuns* was born at Groningen, a University-town since 1614. He sprung from a rigid Mennonite family of merchants. Although in the beginning also intended for the trade, he showed at an early age such an explicit scientific talent, that his parents allowed him to take up the medical study in his native-town.

After his first training at Groningen by his teachers *van Doeveren* and *Lambergen*, he continued his studies at Leyden, where he committed himself to the care of *Winter*, *Gaubius*, *F. B. Albinus* and *van Royen*. He also for some time attended the lectures of *P. Camper* in the Athenaeum at Amsterdam. In concert with these competent professors the studious pupil then left for Paris for a year – where he received instruction by *Rouel*, *Macquer*, *Nollet*, *Moreau*, *Louis*, *Sabatier*, *Morand* and *Levret* – in order to prepare himself still further for the practice.

After his return from France he settled in his native-town, where he acquired an extensive practice in a short time and became a very respected physician. Already for the first vacancy in the

medical faculty he belonged to the candidates, but he was not appointed after all... because of his religious faith. The municipality of Groningen, dreading that now *van Geuns* perhaps should receive a call to another place, then tried to bind him by appointing him Doctor of the Town. In this function he gave lessons in obstetrics, in which he had trained seriously, to midwives and apprentices. When after a short time he was offered a chair in the University of Harderwijk – which he declined however – he was appointed „Archiater” by the municipality of Groningen.

In 1776, applied for the second time, *van Geuns* yielded to the pressure put upon him and accepted a professorship in Harderwijk. There he taught from 1776 till 1791 botany, chemistry, obstetrics, pathology, „practice” and therapy. The University of Utrecht offered him the vacant chair of pathology and „practice” in 1791. Especially allured by this more limited commission he accepted the appointment. His joy about the fact that soon afterwards his son *Steven Jan van Geuns* was appointed professor beside him, was cruelly disturbed by the latter’s early death in 1795. Since then again he taught at the same time botany. He carried out his professional duties till 1815. December 9 1817 he died at the age of 82, after having served the Universities of Harderwijk and Utrecht during 39 years.

Matthias van Geuns possessed particular gifts, which made him pre-eminently fitted for the medical profession. He had at his disposal an indefatigable ardour and devotion, which were supported by his sincere religious convictions and he was continually inspired by a vivid urge for true knowledge. He was severe for others, but also and first of all for himself and he was always righteous. A good psychologist he took a sharp view of persons and situations. He inspired general confidence by his clear, crystallized opinion; his advice was desiriously taken as well by private persons as by committees of social institutions. King *Lewis Napoleon* appointed him „Médecin Consultant”. Several scientific societies accepted him as a fellow-member.

In different fields *van Geuns* has been of significance to the development of medicine.

Of obstetrics he has deserved well especially by his excellent instruction of midwives. In addition to thorough knowledge he demanded a conservative view-point and respect for the *vis medicatrix naturae*.

His merits in the domain of internal medicine are of a different kind. He applied himself to the training of the students heart and soul; upon a whole generation of physicians he has put his stamp. *Boerhaave*’s world-famous instruction at the bedside, which had fallen in serious decay after his death, *van Geuns* has brought to new prosperity by the institution of the Nosocomium at Utrecht, after some time imitated at Leyden and Groningen. In the Netherlands therefore he is by many rightly considered a second *Boerhaave*. In the clinical schooling he stressed dynamism, the doctrine of the innate ability to recovery of nature.

In behalf of the patients of diseases of the respiratory tract he invented an apparatus for inhalation, which resembles much the bronchitis-kettle, used nowadays.

The detailed lecture, in which he described the stenosis of the esophagus, was awarded a gold medal, but did not lead to new aspects, even although *P. Camper* had performed autopsy on some patients, who had died in consequence of this suffering. In this study however *van Geuns* has for the first time recommended the use of an esophagus-sound with a knob, invented by himself.

He devoted special attention to the infectious diseases, which made numerous victims in his time.

Concerning the epidemiology of the bacillary dysentery his opinions on therapy and prevention

were generally accepted and even followed everywhere till far in the nineteenth century. Moreover *van Geuns* was the first to distinguish sharply the significance of the occurrence of immunity in this disease.

During his whole career he occupied himself intensively with the fight against the smallpox. He was among the first who variolated in the Netherlands. He had a correct insight in the essential importance of prevention. In some Academical orations he recommended warmly the cautious application of variolation. After the discovery by *Jenner*, however, he strongly advocated vaccination.

Undoubtedly *van Geuns* has been the intellectual father of the state-regulation of medicine in the Netherlands. Many of the ideas in this field, given to the world by *Johann Peter Frank* between 1779 and 1819, had been revealed already before him by *van Geuns* and fastened down afterwards in his printed orations. By his activity as „*Archiater*” and as president of many Medical Committees he has contributed strongly to a better organisation of the state-supervision of public health. It is striking, what a large number of measures – recommended by him – to the improvement of hygienic and social evils has indeed been executed in the course of the nineteenth century.

Matthias van Geuns is pre-eminently the representative of a period in the medical history, in which people were no longer content with the old and ardently longed for the new. He did not live to see the large scientific flourishing and the depression, in which the country was, has checked the full maturity of his genius. Abroad he has found very little renown.

Respectfully the author dedicated this work to his memory.